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A PAIR OF PAGEANTS

BY W. D. HOWELLS

PERHAPS it is my love of alliteration which tempts me to put together under the same head two events so different in scope and character as the pageant at Chester in 1910 and the pageant at Stroud last summer. Their equal claim upon me is that they were both pageants, for which I have a passion that does not very willingly distinguish in its objects; to my impartial affection it is enough that a pageant is a pageant. Even when I came to London soon after seeing the magnificent historic show at Chester, and saw a "Potted Pageant" at the Apollo playhouse under the direction of Mr. Palissier, my pleasure in the kind was not spoiled by a bouffe William the Conqueror, a burlesque Queen Elizabeth, and a comic Queen Anne taking hands and romping in a ring together with other princes; or by a local mayor who grabbed the whole glory of the affair in an autobiographical opening address: I merely found myself wishing that the potted pageant was as long as the pageant I had just come from.

They had been having pageants before that pretty well all over England—at Bath, at Oxford, at Stratford-on-Avon, and I do not remember just where else—and we had bespoken our joy in that at Chester in some fear that we might miss the last of its sort. We made sure of it by committing ourselves to the purchase of expensive seats at the spectacle, which were the last left at the agency of the good Thomas Cook & Son. I was dismayed to find them, on the plan, next the band, but I was assured that the band would not annoy even so great an enemy of music as I professed myself; in the event we really found it very quiet; there were times when I forgot it was there.

Our train from London brought us to Chester at the

very moment of lunch, and experience had taught us to take it at the Boland Restaurant in one of those Rows, which make two stories of the street; not in a Row of the second story, but of the ground floor. It is at this institution that the royal family, after trying all the other makes in Great Britain, have decided to have its wedding-cakes made (there are terrible effigies of such cakes in the window); but even if you are not a member of that family and do not want to be married you can get perhaps the best, or at least the butteriest, tea-cakes in England at Boland's. You can also get a very good lunch, in the company of other lunchers who crowd every table, up-stairs and down. But if you are served by a quiet little Welsh maid, whose native hills robe themselves in the azure which distance lends as the eye looks westward from Chester, do not permit yourself, in your expansion from the good cheer, to express the hope that she has seen the pageant. She may answer, with her professional smile clouded by personal feeling, that they have been so busy at Boland's she has had no time and will not have even this last day. Beware, then, of asking about the dance which you have seen advertised for that evening; if you do you must go farther and learn that she could get time for that; then nothing remains for you but to supply the four shillings for the ticket and bring the light back to the young face. It is no great sum, to be sure; but I would have you reflect upon the enormity of encouraging frivolity in the lower classes and raising the vain hope in the hearts of quiet little Welsh maids that every American traveler will be as weak as yourself.

Chester was, however, so full of the holiday emotions of the pageant that the pocket opens almost of itself. Their play encountered the eye wherever it turned, in the ancient Britons of both sexes clad in the sheepskins or wolfskins so much worn at one period among them; Roman soldiery of the rank and file, sometimes wearing and sometimes carrying their helmets; early Saxons, secular and clerical; early Normans and early English in their several habits, with tributary Welshmen in theirs; crusaders, prelates, monks and nuns, subjects of Richard II. and James I., and Round-heads and Cavaliers. Besides the historical personages, public or private, there were allegorical figures, old and young, on their way to help in the representation of the City, the River Dee, and the like. If some of these did not

actually ride down to the grounds on the same tram-top with us, we passed them on their walk thither in pleasant emulation of the tram's effort to arrive first with us. When we were on foot within the grounds the allegory and history easily outwalked us.

The characters were in a hurry, doubtless, to find their places in the order of the pageant and we could loiter on with no care but to arrive at the vast wooden auditorium and get our seats. The mid-July day was one of the best that any summer could do in England, and it was one of the best that the actual summer could do anywhere, though the season was of great cold and wet. Large spaces in the sky were blue and there were acceptable masses of white clouds in the blue, white clouds with their edges and bulks roughed here and there to a fine rustiness; clouds such as Constable liked to paint in his English landscapes, with trees tossing under them. The air was delicious, growing a little fresher as the afternoon wore away and deciding in the evening to be so cold that in the abiding indoors chill we judged it best to have a fire in the grate at our hotel.

The grounds for the pageant were lent by the Duke of Westminster, who could spare them for the week of the show without greatly missing them from the eight thousand acres attached to his seat there. They were generously ample and were perfectly fitted to be the scene of the magnificent spectacle by their shape and their simple and effective features. They spread before the spectator in a rounded square of nearly a mile in length and breadth, and where the green plain sloped gently away on every side, beautiful groves rose densely and formed the setting of the incomparable scene. Through those dark arras the actors in the pageant came and went by thousands on foot and horseback, or, emerging, fluttered over the grass as if their wings of gauze and silk helped them in a real flight.

We had the company of some fairies of tender and mature years as well as of the scattering allegorical and historical types in our rather long way from where the tram left us to our seats next the unjustly dreaded orchestra. But then the usual wait ensued before we confronted them in action, and we had time to become aware of that smell of the trodden weed and of the fresh pine planking which is so temperamental of circuses and county fairs, and of those hasty

shelters for the purveyance of cold victuals and hot drinks (tea, only, at Chester and not our more national coffee), but there the parallel ended. There is no place in America with memories half or a tenth or a twentieth as long as Chester's. Her record beggars history and must be imagined in its earliest details, for there is nothing really very reliable known of the Druidic civilization. We had to take the Druids and the Druidesses on trust, but we did so gladly; they looked so attractive. The ancient Britons more acceptably vouched for themselves, and when, after an entirely allegorical introductory act, with the goddess River Dee and the god Chester City (and persons "presenting walls" and gates and towers) we came to the good Roman general Agricola and the attempt of an indignant Briton, whose wife has been insulted by a centurion, to assassinate the general, we were on the firm ground of imaginable history. In these circumstances it was very satisfactory to have the Briton pardoned and the centurion condemned to death within the hour, though with my weak-hearted reluctance from capital punishment I could not help hoping his sentence would be commuted to banishment from the British Isles; the summer there was then so wet and cold he would not have minded that much.

The English like their patriotism good and thick (as I suppose we like ours), and a main business of the pageants, which have covered a large part of their country in these last years, has been to flatter their local and national pride. Of course they have a good deal to be proud of as well as sorry for in their history, and their history has touched significantly almost every place in the country. At Chester, as I need not tell the well-guide-booked American, history has touched significantly very often and even made important pauses. It was to these touches and pauses that the beautiful pageant was now devoted. There was that opening allegory and the assertion of British manhood and the sanctity of the British home in that passage with Agricola at no exact date, and then there was King Edgar receiving in 973 the homage of tributary princes, which, as the princes were Welsh and of my own blood, went somewhat against my grain; then in 1093 there was Hugh Lupus (whose lineage still survives at Chester in the reigning nobleman, the Duke of Westminster) helping St. Anselm found the Abbey of St. Warburg; then, a century later, that

delightful author, Giraldus Cambrensis, helping Archbishop Baldwin preach the Crusade at Chester; then, another century later, Prince Edward, the first royal earl, visiting the city; in yet another poor Richard II., brought captive there by proud Bolingbroke; then, after a great jump of three centuries, James I. visiting Chester, and presently his son Charles I. besieged there by Cromwell in 1645 and driven out of the place, which surrendered itself to Parliament. I will not be sure which of the last two events was graced by the morris dancing of the little girls and the young girls, with their mates, or in which the clowns capered about and wrestled and threw somersaults; but we will say the merry-men helped receive James I. (he was something of a buffoon himself), and that it was the prettier revels which the Round-heads broke up when they rushed upon the scene after much musketry in the distance and the flight of Charles I. To end all, there was a résumé of the events in a tableau before the grand-stand.

It will have been imagined from the detail of these events what motive there was for gorgeous costuming and brilliant action. The literature of the pageant was necessarily an "easy thing to understand," but it was so in no slighting sense, and the art in the color scheme was, if not the last word, at least the next to the last. It had strongly the support of nature in that beauty of the English race which I think grows upon the observer. In former visits I had been, in my modest American way, impressed by the handsomeness of the men, and I still think them the handsomest men in Europe, if somewhat unnecessarily long-legged and narrow-shouldered; but at present I am lost in a far readier and more unenvious wonder at the women's and children's loveliness, especially the children's. It does not always follow that a lovely little girl will grow up a lovely young girl; the angelic features sometimes turn out humanly lumpy, but generally they do not; the young girls are mostly more beautiful than the little girls, if not more delicately beautiful, and the women keep their beauty of face and figure longer; there are not so many lean ones, nor so many fat ones among the matrons as with us. In them all—little girls, young girls, and wives and mothers—the beauty is not beauty of coloring alone, but beauty of feature and a universal kindness of expression. In England everybody seems kind; and they perhaps must be kind or, packed

so densely together as they are, they would kill one another. Another characteristic of the race which especially lent itself to the effect of such a thing as the Chester pageant is its all but universal single-mindedness. The children not more than the women, the women not more than the men, had given themselves to the work of their play with a seriousness unbroken by the ironical self-consciousness which with us would have forced them to treat it as a huge joke, however well they did it.

The Chester pageant, it must be understood, was the voluntary dedication of time and person by the performers to the public event. That was no mean sacrifice, for the pageant lasted a whole week, day after day; the rehearsals must have lasted twice as long, and the preparation of the costumes and properties must have taken months. Everything was done by the actors themselves, though of course under esthetic direction. Every class and almost every calling was represented among the performers; the Countess of Grosvenor, who marched past the grandstand, was not more superb or less sincere in her stately beauty than the magnificent girl studying for the stage who represented the River Dee throughout the allegory and the events where a river might fitly intervene. The men and the women took their parts as simple-heartedly as the children, but of course the children were the most charming, whether they were boys or girls. It was a gallant sight when the kingly or princely horsemen broke in a gallop from those distant groves and spread over that mighty meadow with their retinues following on foot; it was fine to see the queens and their gentlewomen in the dress of their different epochs; it was richly satisfying to look on James the First and Charles the First and Cromwell in the flesh, with earlier and less familiar sovereigns dating back from Richard the Second; but that nameless multitude of little ones flashing from the woods and flying down the grass was best. It was in these endearing creatures that the color scheme of the pageant had its supreme effect, and if many colds and coughs and countless aches and pains must ensue from their high joys the joys were worth them.

How long the spectacle lasted I would not like to say; only it came to an end too soon for me in that heartbreak which the last act of one's earliest (or latest) circus brings. The pageant was, in fact, very like a circus in the emotions it

roused; and at times I was aware of the band going on at my elbow like a circus band, but perhaps sweetlier and never molestively. At times there was singing, very good singing, from a choir at my elbow, such as they have in England; and at one high moment there was an intermission when everybody broke away and thronged the sheds behind the grand-stand for tea. The crowd outnumbered the placid maidens pouring the tea perhaps a thousand to one; and the maidens served with fine impartiality the comeliest of the youth who pressed upon them. When one who was neither a youth nor comely soliloquized his despair of tea from them in the cry, "Well, I give it up," a comely youth had compassion on him in the reply, "Oh, don't lose heart!" and won a general applause, while the object of his pity moved off to another shed where a plain, middle-aged matron sold him a cup of tea instantly.

In the delaying perfection of photography, which still halts short of the hues of life in its endeavor for reality, there is no manner of imparting an adequate notion of the beauty and splendor of the Chester pageant. Not having been a contemporary of the different events, I could not be sure whether they were accurately clothed or not, but I imagine all that had been most intelligently looked to. What I was sure of was my pleasure in the ever-streaming, ever-fleeting color. Of course the women were more beautifully clad than the men, though these had occasionally the superior splendor which our sex has now mostly left to peacocks and turkey-gobblers and major-generals; but it was the children, those lovely English children, who supremely took the eye in their silken blues and reds and yellows. They came pouring over the scene literally in thousands; they danced, they seemed to fly; nothing more exquisite, more innocently dear was ever seen. Whatever the historic incident was, they were appropriate to it; they graced, they hallowed it. I dare say they were sometimes naughty in every-day life and had to be cuffed, or at least snubbed, and sent prematurely to bed, but there was no hint of this in the pageant, or of the stomach-aches which must follow their prolonged exposure and exertion. After the pageant, when we began to see them straying homeward through the streets, they were still angels; tired angels who were somewhat languidly doing Morris Off when they had been so vigorously doing Morris On.

Fragments of the spectacle, dispersed and returning for the time to private life, showed themselves to our well-contented eyes; young fellows in their prehistoric skins and furs, consorting impartially with Druidesses and court ladies, and Puritan maidens coquetting with Cavaliers off duty, were to be seen on the way to our hotel and disappearing down the different side streets where they possibly dwelt. If I had my choice, I think I should prefer to have kept for longest companionship a Roman soldier on a bicycle, with his helmet hanging at his saddle-bow for his greater convenience in smoking a cigarette. But I should like to have kept them all, and my only sorrow is that the Chester pageant should not have lasted till now, that it should so soon have followed the circuses of my boyhood into the irrevocable past.

It seemed extremely probable that we should have to walk the whole way back to town, but if you will have patience you can nearly always get some sort of carriage to take you home in England, and there really proved a superfluity of conveyances from the pageant grounds; in the persisting excitement everybody else seemed to prefer going on foot. When we reached our hotel we found it as cold as if the day had not been fine, and that question which so often besets you in England, "Shall we have a fire or sha'n't we?" perplexed us till in our desperation we spent the one-and-six which a fire costs and had a fire. We did not regret it; but if I had saved the one-and-six and gone shuddering to sleep the suffering would since have been made up to me by the suffering from the heat which I underwent on my way to the pageant at Stroud last summer. That season will live long in the memories of people who lived through it, for the drought and the heat were unparalleled. To suggest the excess of both one must beg the American reader to draw upon his associations with our torriddest Fourths of July, and imagine these terrible anniversaries repeating themselves uninterruptedly for a month. My journey to Stroud was through what are usually the loveliest of the English levels, but now on both sides the burned fields stretched away in a dry brown for which our favorite figure of a door-mat is inexpressive. They were not only dry and brown, they were often dry and gray; ashen deserts which had abandoned any notion of verdure. The dusty hedges ran backward and outward

from the train, sere, stiff, lifeless; the trees which are so plump and full in the English landscape stood lean and listless in circles of their fallen leaves. Stroud is a pretty town, mostly manufacturing, with tall chimneys "hearsed with plumes of smoke," but also streets and streets of pleasant small dwellings stretching along the slopes of the Cotswold Hills. As we neared the place and began to mount these slopes the scenery began to cheer up a little; when we reached Stroud, it was as if the pageant had arranged with the elements and had really provided itself with something like the wonted English green for its entourage. It had not rained apparently, and the stage, though not comparable in size with the stage at Chester, could not have been lawn-hosed, yet it was green and it comforted the eyes after that vision of a burned-out world.

The scene of the Stroud pageant, though it was no such vast expanse as the scene of the pageant at Chester, was still ample, and it held the slighter performance in an embrace which was not too strict for it and yet not too lax for its details. Some rows of trees formed the *coulisses*, and behind them one could see the actors in the events gathering before they came upon the scene. On the turfy slopes to left and right the spectators thronged in the white or the bright dresses that contrasted with the green where they stood or lounged in large or little groups. The English sun, that often seems so fierce, does not mean murder like ours; the heat was strong, but no one would suffer exhaustion from it, and those pretty colors did not shriek as they would have shrieked in our thin air. Even at two o'clock a delicate haze veiled the gentle hills forming the amphitheater, and as the afternoon waned they grew dimmer and dimmer under it.

The grass of those hills has been immemorially cropped by sheep whose wool has locally been more desired than their mutton, and the thread of industrial interest which ran through the incidents of the pageant was the fiber which successive improvements have refined and woven into richer and softer cloths at Stroud. Another thread, but this of humanitarian interest, which helped hold the scenes together, was the notion of advancing civilization which the poet of the play boldly declared in the title of a "Mid-Gloucestershire Pageant of Progress." He had meant to "moralize his song" and his difficulty was to let it not "perhaps turn

out a sermon." He had succeeded in this as well as in keeping his text simple and plain without allowing it to drop to the level of commonplace. It kept the level of the common people, which is not that of commonplace, and it expressed the things that might have been felt and thought about the facts by the actors. For these men, women, and children were work-folk, Stroud factory operatives and Stroud farmers, who had given the leisure won from their work to learning and dressing and staging the poet's intention. Of course there was an artistic scheme for the pageant, as there was a literary scheme, and the work-folk conformed to the one as they conformed to the other. But that they should love both so much as to give their time and their money to both formed the charm of the affair which began drawing me irresistibly to Stroud as soon as I read of the promised pageant.

Naturally, perhaps inevitably, the pageant opened with a scene between the Druidic Britons and the humane Roman soldiers who released some captives about to be offered up in worship by the Druids, and erected "an altar to Terminus, the god of roads," to whose cult we doubtless owe at this day our pleasure in traveling about England. A more historical incident followed in the Lady Gytha's forcing Earl Godwin, by refusing to eat any food from the lands he had robbed the Nuns of Berkeley of, to make them due reparation with other lands for their convent. Next the King's commissioners, coming to value the lands for the Domesday Book, liberate a coffle of child slaves on their way to be sold in Bristol; next Edward III. teaches the people of the Cotswold Hills to tolerate the Flemish weavers he has brought among them that they may learn how to weave their own wool and not send it away to be woven; next Queen Elizabeth reads them a like toleration of the Huguenot refugees who have come among them and whom the singers and dancers round the maypole have turned from their merry-making to kick and cuff. Another episode brings Puritans and Cavaliers together in hailing, for peace' sake, the return of King Charles II.; he has not yet had time to show himself the ungrateful blackguard he was, and one could forgive the limping logic of his people's reconciliation to him. Mrs. Siddons, in the succeeding event, instructs the good, kind, dull George III. to think better of the theater than he has done hitherto, and the King con-

gratulates Robert Raikes on the institution of Sunday-schools. After this there are Corn Law Riots in 1846, which are appeased by the news of the repeal of the Corn Laws; and the pageant closes with a vision of Present Day Progress. Fortunately, the great railway strike had just ended, and the incongruities could not make themselves felt so keenly as they might have done ten days earlier.

If I have insisted too wholly on the part taken by the work-folk in the pageant, this seems the place to say that some of the gentle as well as the simple shared in it. Lady Gytha was done by the wife of the poet, and Mrs. Siddons by a young lady of a chief local family, who both gave artistic as well as social distinction to the affair, though for me it had its supreme appeal as the affair of the common people. I believe it was the poet's notion that it should be so; and I might easily praise more than I have praised his sympathetic conception of progress as the advance which they had made. They were humorously as well as pathetically characterized in his drama, which touched the extinct conditions with the life of passion and prejudice and painted the picture while it told the story of the past. Now and then, as in the portraiture of our own last king, that poor George III., with his "What, what, what?" and his "Eh? Eh?" there was a bit of refreshing comedy.

The pageant was throughout a series of escapes from the didactic for the poet, but these were so triumphant that I found myself forgetting at times the ethical import of this scene or that in the beauty of it. I feel now as if I had rather rubbed the moral in on my reader; but the trouble is that I could bring the moral away with me and I had to leave the loveliness behind in that cup of the Cotswold Hills; the singing and the dancing, the brave dressing, the good, stout declamation of some, the delicate sense and expression of others. I had to leave even the Boy Scouts, who helped operate the pageant and were evident throughout, as they are so often in England now. They did not, perhaps, operate the pageant so distinctly as their early presence on the scene seemed to promise, but they became remarkably useful before it ended in bringing round tea. With their bare arms and legs and sandal-shoon, and staves with which they help their activities in scouting throughout Britain, they were as picturesque as any integral actors in the drama.

W. D. HOWELLS.